

LESSON 7 God Wants You to Care for the Church

The church is the body of Christ with Jesus himself as the head. We Christians are members or parts of the body. The apostle Paul develops this idea in 1 Corinthians 12. He shows how important each part is to the whole, how each part is concerned for the others, and how all parts suffer or are content together.

Another picture of the church is the family. Members of a family need each other and take care of each other. They work and play together and mourn and rejoice together. They share food, beds, money, problems, even sicknesses. Sometimes, unfortunately, they fight among themselves, although deep down, they really love each other. Most often they are united in love, ready to defend each other against any opposition.

The law of love is of greatest importance in the family of God. In this lesson, we will see how the law of love is applied through the principles of service and stewardship in the church.

The Plan

- A. Unity in the Family of God
- B. Service in the Family of God
- C. Stewardship in the Family of God

The Goals

- 1. Explain the importance of unity in the family of God.
- 2. Describe how the law of love can be made practical through service.
- 3. Identify ways to be a wise steward of your possessions and gifts.

A. UNITY IN THE FAMILY OF GOD

Goal 1. Explain the importance of unity in the family of God.

Before Jesus gave himself on the Cross, He prayed for those who would believe and become part of His church. His prayer was simple, but profound: “I pray . . . that all of them may be one” (John 17:20–21).

Unity is vital to the spiritual and physical development. Sometimes there is disunity in a person’s body. For instance, some cells reject the control of the rest of the body; they grow rapidly and end up killing the person. In a church, disunity can also kill.

This concerned Paul about the church in Corinth. The Corinthians did not recognize the singleness of Christ’s body and were in danger of destroying it. What they needed was love to heal their divisions (1 Corinthians 13).

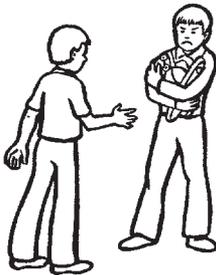
The book of James deals with another problem of disunity: prejudice. James was upset that believers were being treated

differently according to how they looked (James 2:9). He found this kind of distinction evil, foolish, and against the law of love.

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. (James 2:8–9)

Christians must not discriminate against people based on riches, education, race, or any other factor. Indeed, in God’s family worldly principles are rejected. Paul said that the man who thought he was “wise by the standards of this age, . . . should become a ‘fool’ so that he may become wise” (1 Corinthians 3:18). Earlier, Jesus told His quarreling disciples, “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant” (Matthew 20:26). He also said, “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 10:39).

Since we enter God’s family by grace, there is no place for boasting (Ephesians 2:9). There is sadness when a child wants everything for himself and will not share or work with the others. The Father does not tolerate selfishness or laziness. Boasting, selfishness, laziness—these are worldly principles. But in the church, the principles of humble service and loving stewardship should be put into action, so that there might be unity.



If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his

love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Philippians 2:1–4)

B. SERVICE IN THE FAMILY OF GOD

Goal 2. Describe how the law of love can be made practical through service.

As members of Christ's body, we are instructed to live, work, and worship in harmony. Since we are not yet perfect, there are sometimes problems in the church. Disunity creeps in all too easily. The Bible does not hide how difficult it is to leave behind the world's standards.

Frequently, believers are urged to love each other, not in theory but in practice. Paul urges the believers in Rome,

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. (Romans 12:9–10)

Respect is one way to show love. Too often young people, who may have more schooling, fail to respect older Christians. This is wrong and foolish (see 1 Timothy 5:1). On the other hand, Paul encouraged Timothy to expect respect from older people, though he was young (1 Timothy 4:12). Respect is an attitude. Love must express itself also in action: doing good to our Christian brothers.

Let us not become weary in doing good, . . .
as we have opportunity, let us do good to all

people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers. (Galatians 6:9–10)

How can we do good? First we must keep at heart the interests of our brothers and sisters, not just our own interests (1 Corinthians 10:24). This is particularly necessary when they are new or weak Christians. We must avoid doing things to harm their faith. We must help them even when it is inconvenient or displeasing to us.

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. (Romans 15:1–2)

Paul goes on to tell us in this passage that dealing with other people requires endurance (verse 5) and acceptance or tolerance (verse 7), which Christ showed in His life of service. To do good we must also be aware of people's needs.

Is someone in the church sick, out of work, or in need of food? It is our responsibility to notice and, if we can, help.

Keep on loving one another as Christian brothers. Remember to welcome strangers in your homes. There were some who did that and welcomed angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them. Remember those who are suffering, as though you were suffering as they are. (Hebrews 13:1–3)



Here the general commandment to love is followed by exact directions. Remember to be hospitable; remember to visit the prisoners; remember to help the suffering. Jesus said that at the final judgment people will be judged by whether they did such kindness or not.

Many people, busy with religious activities, sometimes forget that faith must be put into practice. This is the message of James, when he describes genuine religion: “To look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (James 1:27).

Loving unity and practical compassion marked the first believers. When they knew of a need, they acted, just as Jesus always did, from compassion and love. This should be our goal as well.

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. (Acts 4:32)

Application

1 Circle the letter before each TRUE statement that shows an expression of service to the body of Christ.

- a)** Criticize the pastor for his lack of love
- b)** Cultivate the garden of a sick widow
- c)** Help a new Christian learn to read a portion of the Bible
- d)** Help the family of a Christian who is in prison for his faith
- e)** Laugh at a brother with ragged clothes
- f)** Invite a church visitor to your house
- g)** Help a rich Christian in hope of getting a job from him

2 In your notebook list five people in your Christian family whom you can help, and list your plan for helping each one.

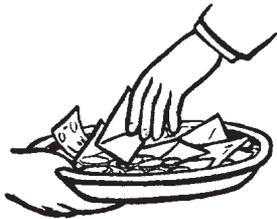


C. STEWARDSHIP IN THE FAMILY OF GOD

Goal 3. Identify ways to be a wise steward of your possessions and gifts.

The first believers, who showed their love and unity by sharing their possessions, were serving each other. They were using their belongings in a way that showed responsible stewardship. This sharing of wealth is found throughout the New Testament. When the Christians at Antioch knew there was to be a famine, they “decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea” (Acts 11:29). Perhaps Paul remembered that incident when he wrote to the church at Rome: “Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality” (Romans 12:13).

Hospitality is both service and stewardship. It helps others, and it is the wise and proper use of the homes that God has allowed us to have. Remember what was said about stewardship in Lesson 5. All our possessions are loaned to us to be used rightly, for the good of others and for God’s glory. That includes giving for the work of the gospel, both locally and in missionary activity. The apostle John commended his friend Gaius for his faithful giving to Christian workers, who were even strangers to him. John gave a good reason for sharing this way: “We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth” (3 John 8).



By supporting those who work for God, we are taking part in the work they do. Besides, such giving is “a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God” (Philippians 4:18).

We can also be involved in the ministry of the church in a personal way. Perhaps you already give time and energy to spreading the gospel in your area and helping the believers in your church. That is wonderful! God desires us to do our best to work for Him.

But perhaps you need some guidance on how you may best serve the church and be a wise steward of God's gifts to you. This was the case in the Corinthian church in regard to spiritual gifts. These believers were eager, but without knowledge. They thought everyone should show the same spiritual ability or gift. Paul reminded them that they were the body of Christ, and that bodies have different parts for different functions. He listed several gifts of the Spirit, and urged the Corinthians to use spiritual gifts in love (1 Corinthians 14:1, 4).

The purpose of all God's gifts is to build up the church by helping Christians become more like Jesus (1 Corinthians 14:12). Some of these gifts are for use in church services, to worship God and proclaim His message, yet they are always to build up the church (1 Corinthians 14:26). Others are less noticeable, but just as necessary: serving, teaching, sharing, organizing, showing kindness (Romans 12:6–8).

Now, we Christians are parts of Christ's body and each part has a different job (Romans 12:4–5). "We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith" (Romans 12:6).

As stewards of God's gracious gifts, we have to do three things. First, we must search our lives, pray to God, and ask mature Christians about the gifts we may have. Second, we must use and develop the gifts we know we have—for the building up of the church—while praying for other gifts and for love (1 Corinthians 12:31). Third, we must encourage other Christians to do the same. That way, we help them to be good stewards too, just as Barnabas helped Saul (later called the apostle Paul) to develop his great gift of teaching (see Acts 11:25–26).

Remember that it is the Lord Jesus himself who gives gifts to us, whether they are natural abilities or spiritual gifts. As Ephesians 4:7–16 teaches us, He gives them to prepare all of His people to serve Him better and to build up the whole church. To function correctly within the church then, and to be good stewards of His gifts, we must aim at becoming mature under His direction.

From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (Ephesians 4:16)

Application

3 Circle the letter before each activity below which shows good stewardship toward the body of Christ.

- a)** Sharing a hymn God has given you
- b)** Bringing visiting Christians into your home
- c)** Being ready for God to use you to build up the church
- d)** Trying to be the only one to pray or speak in tongues in church
- e)** Supporting others' ministries by gifts and prayers
- f)** Allowing others to share their insights into Scripture

4 Pray, either alone or with a mature Christian, about what gifts God has given you. In your notebook, write at least one gift you think you have received and ways in which you can help the body by using it. You may want to ask your pastor or another Christian to give you guidance about when and how you can best develop your gift.



Check Your Answers

- 2** Your answer
- 3** Phrases **a)**, **b)**, **c)**, **e)**, and **f)** show good stewardship.
- 1** Phrases **b)**, **c)**, **d)**, and **f)** are true.
- 4** Your answer